

Pennsylvania's State Houses and Capitols

LONG AFTER THE founding of Pennsylvania in 1681 and the Charter of Privileges granted by William Penn to the Province in 1701, colonists took little active thought of where their Assembly should have a fixed place of meeting. Year after year members of that legislative body gathered officially in an inn, a meetinghouse, a coffeeshouse, a markethouse, or the commodious residence of some more well-to-do legislator, and generally in the city of

tion of £2,000, which carried unanimously and paved the way for further debate and procedure.

The State House, or "House for the Assembly of this Province to meet in," came slowly. Andrew Hamilton, eminent lawyer and for many years clerk of assembly, became chief proponent of a site and of a plan for the structure. Chestnut Street below Sixth replaced High Street as the location. Hamilton had building materials gathered together for it, executed a



An architect's vision of the Pennsylvania State Capitol, 1904, prepared for Joseph M. Huston, the architect of the building.

Philadelphia; and Philadelphians grew used to having it there.

It is not surprising, then, that the Assembly received on February 20, 1729, a petition praying that that "House would by a law empower" the city and county of Philadelphia to "build a Market and State House in High Street, near the Prison." The petition was laid on the table that day, but nine weeks later, on May 1, it emerged in a motion calling for an appropri-

rough drawing of his concept of how it should be constructed, and spurred preparations. In the summer of 1736 John Penn, "the American," only son of the Founder born in Pennsylvania, made a payment of five pounds to Edmund Woolley for his more expert designs for the new Provincial State House, then completed in its broader proportions. In late September of that same year Mayor William Allen of Philadelphia entertained there at a great banquet of citizens.



Courtesy American Philosophical Society

The State House, Philadelphia, by Fumagalli. It became known later as Independence Hall.

In October, a few weeks later, the Assembly of Pennsylvania had its first meetings there. Yet the building's interior would not be fully paneled and wainscoted for five years more—until 1751—its great bell would not be installed until 1753, nor would it be pronounced complete with a tower before 1758.

All that was a commonplace and modest evolution for an edifice which in the course of time would become the most famous State House on the American continent. The Minutes of Assembly of 1736, in fact, make no mention whatever of the Assembly's gathering there. Government, not place of it, it seems, was the only important point.

Not until 1775, when the second meeting of the Continental Congress occurred in it, or until July 4, 1776, when the Declaration of American Independence was adopted in it, was the Pennsylvania State House to mount into lasting fame. And not until fifty years after that was it to be popularly known as "Independence Hall." Here, however, met the convention which shaped Pennsylvania's Constitution of 1776; and here in September, 1777, the Assembly of the new State was meeting when Washington's loss of the Battle of the Brandywine opened Philadelphia to the threat of General Howe's advancing army. Then on the 14th of that month the House ordered its papers and records, under the

direction of its clerk, John Morris, Jr., to be carried up the Delaware River "on board the brig *Sturdy Beggar* to Col. Kirkbride's, and there kept, or carried further." Two days later the House realized that "all active friends of American liberty were obliged to leave" Philadelphia, news having come that "the enemy's army was in full march for this city"; and on the 18th of September it adjourned as a body, resolving to meet in the borough of Lancaster on Thursday, the 25th.

Their records saved by prompt action, assemblymen got to the inland city as soon as they could; but it was not until the morning of October 6, two days after Washington had retired from the Battle of Germantown, that a quorum of members could be assembled. During the fateful winter when Washington's soldiers suffered with him at Valley Forge, the government of Pennsylvania functioned—somewhat precariously to be sure—at Lancaster, with the Assembly meeting in the uncomfortable early brick courthouse. On May 25, 1778, the body adjourned to gather again, place unnamed, on September 9. Happily a summons came from the Supreme Executive Council of the Commonwealth to return to Philadelphia, a month earlier, in August. When on the 7th of that month



Lancaster County courthouse, 1787-1853, was the State House of Pennsylvania from 1799 to 1812. It was located in the center of Penn Square, Lancaster, and was razed in 1853.

they met again with proper quorum, it was in a State House considerably marred internally by the British occupation but capable of restoration for their use for another twenty-two years.

Indeed, that structure of Andrew Hamilton's and Edmund Woolley's designing, known everywhere as the State House of Pennsylvania, was to remain the physical seat of government for the Commonwealth until 1799. To its early eminence as the site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence it was to add in 1789-1790 the honor of being the place where the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1790 was shaped.

A temporary eclipse was to come upon it, however. Back county legislators argued that Philadelphia was too far from the center of the State and decried the presence of epidemics in the city on the Delaware. They proposed moving the seat of government to Carlisle, Reading, Wright's Ferry, or Harrisburg. Debate in the Assembly continued until April, 1799, when Governor Thomas Mifflin approved an Act of the House of Representatives and the Senate (the Assembly now had two houses), and by force of it directed the seat of government to be removed to Lancaster in the next November.

Preparations were made more leisurely now than in 1777. The summer beheld frequent spectacles of wagons moving forwards from the city on the Delaware to Lancaster. Accounts for the hauling of desks, books, papers, and records came in great numbers to Commissioners Jacob Strickler, Matthias Barton, and Thomas Boude. On the appointed date, November 1, 1799, Lancaster became the capital of Pennsylvania for a second time; and its new second brick courthouse, a replica of the earlier one in which the Assembly had sat in 1777-1778, became the State House of the Commonwealth, to remain such for thirteen years.

But legislators were not yet satisfied that the seat of Pennsylvania's law making bodies had been made satisfactorily central. In February, 1810, in the term of Governor Simon Snyder, an act, approved despite the objections of Northumberland County and Philadelphia City and County assemblymen, established the capital at Harrisburg, on the Susquehanna. For a third time, in October, 1812, the scene of removal of government was reenacted.

This time, however, conditions were different. Two "Fire-Proof Buildings," with great stone



The old Capitol at Harrisburg, designed by Stephen Hills, after the fire, 1897.

porticos on their front elevations, had been built to receive the books and records of officers of state like the surveyor general, the auditor, and the treasurer. The fifteen-year-old Dauphin County courthouse on Market Street had been renovated by master carpenter Stephen Hills to accommodate the two houses of the legislature. The clerk of the House of Representatives, George Heckert, conducted sale of the furniture which that body had used in its chamber in Lancaster, and helped increase funds for new desks, tables, and record shelves in Harrisburg. Young men of that borough and the neighboring countryside drove covered wagons to Lancaster to load up with libraries, records, legislative records, and executive documents.

For nine years thereafter the second courthouse of Dauphin County was known as the State House of Pennsylvania. Newspapers were printed "opposite the State House on Market Street"; boarding house mistresses advertised their locations as "a few doors" from it. But while it served in its proud capacity, the minds of Pennsylvanians and particularly of Harrisburgers were much on another subject. So much, indeed, were they upon it that in March, 1816, the Legislature worked out a scheme for selling the abandoned State House in Philadelphia to the city in which it stood. The State needed funds for the erection of a new capitol; to pro-

cure a substantial amount, "Independence Hall" was offered to the city for \$70,000.

Two months later, in May, Stephen Hills was put to work gathering building materials for a great new edifice to be set up on the public ground between the two "Fire-Proof" office buildings, of which Commissioners Jacob Bucher and Edward Crouch had superintended the construction in 1810-1812.

For a year Mr. Hills gathered, in a manner not greatly different from Andrew Hamilton's a century earlier, his vast store of supplies in stone, brick, lumber, and slate; and men eagerly watched it grow. But once more there were delays. The treasury was not replete in funds. Citizens had to wait until 1819 and Governor William Findlay's term of office for construction to begin on the building, for which Hills had submitted the winning design. On January 2, 1822, from the "State House" on Market Street, masons, bricklayers, carpenters, plasterers, glaziers, laborers, clergymen, Governor Joseph Hiester, the executive officers, the House and the Senate, and Mr. Stephen Hills himself marched to the dedication of the now completed first Capitol—not an old-fashioned "State House"—which Pennsylvania owned.

It was a sturdy, nobly proportioned building, admirably suited to the purposes which it was to serve. Its lofty portico and high dome exhibited graces of architecture exceeded for beauty nowhere else in the Commonwealth, unless by the beautiful tower and cupola which crowned "Independence Hall" after it had become the property of the city of Philadelphia and been restored in 1828 by the famous architect William Strickland. It was destined to be the physical seat of government for Pennsylvania for three-quarters of a century. In it were studied and passed by legislators those laws which created the Pennsylvania Canal, many of the great corporately owned navigation companies and all the great railroads in the State, and the Commonwealth's system of public schools.

When fire destroyed it on February 2, 1897, it was as though an era of grandeur had come to an end. Today all of us would rather have lost the old Capitol than "Independence Hall."



President Theodore Roosevelt opens his address at the dedication of the new Capitol, October 4, 1906. Seated to the right, on the platform at the foot of the Capitol steps, hatless, is Governor Samuel W. Pennypacker.

But old-time Pennsylvanians really needed something like the Commonwealth's magnificent second Capitol, built in 1902-1906, to console them for a loss so incalculable. Italian Renaissance in architectural type, designed by Joseph M. Houston, of Indiana limestone rather than of brick and local sandstone, the present building is incomparably handsome in exterior and interior, exquisite in a thousand details. Memories of much wise legislation and of Pennsylvania's participation in two great world wars for human liberty cluster about it. It, too, will grow mellow with time. But today it is best for us—as Pennsylvania's four "State Houses" and its other first Capitol have been best for us—as a visible symbol of the greatness of law, justice, and wisdom in a republican form of government, in which men take counsel together for the good of society and a people.

Published by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, 1969. Revised edition. Text by Hubertis Cummings; edited by Dr. S. K. Stevens and Donald H. Kent. The Historic Pennsylvania Leaflets are sold for five cents a copy; in quantities of ten or more the price is three cents each.